MONTEREY

Would *you* be crazy enough to let the guys from the shop drive *your* priceless 300SL Gullwing and Roadster 3600 miles to the vintage races at Laguna Seca?

BY JEAN LINDAMOOD

"Seldom has so much automotive charisma been carried by a mere handful of letters and numbers."

—Karl Ludvigsen
The Mercedes-Benz Racing Cars

Essex, Massachusetts—Alex Finigan doesn't own a Mercedes-Benz 300SL. Few people do: only 1400 of the spectacular Gullwings were built from 1954 to 1957. But Finigan has been restoring them for a decade, most recently for Paul Russell at the Gullwing Service Company, thirty-five miles north of Boston in Essex.

There are two parts to Alex Finigan: He is the worst sort of car freak, one who has a photographic memory and who has twenty car magazines delivered to his house every month. And Finigan is a full-blown nut case. Sha Na Na on speed. "We never see Alex down," say his co-workers. "In the shop, he's a howl. If he hears a song he likes on the radio, he puts it up real loud and sings at the top of his lungs. Alex really enjoys life."

"I'm a fourteen-year-old," says Finigan, eyes crossed and tongue out, "with forty years' experience."

You need to know a little of Paul Russell's philosophy on the art of Gullwing restoration to understand why customer Nick Jones loaned Alex Finigan his rare $150,000, aluminum-bodied 1955 Gullwing (number twenty-eight of twenty-nine aluminum Gullwings made) to drive to Monterey. The Gullwing Service Company is not a museum. When the guys come to work and look around the shop (today the work bays hold a 1957 Gullwing, a 1957 Roadster, a 1953 170S, a 1961 Roadster, an aluminum Gullwing belonging to Ralph Lauren, a white 1956 Gullwing, and a chassis believed to be the first Gullwing), they see cars. And their job is to put those cars back on the road in perfect running order—in most cases, better than new.

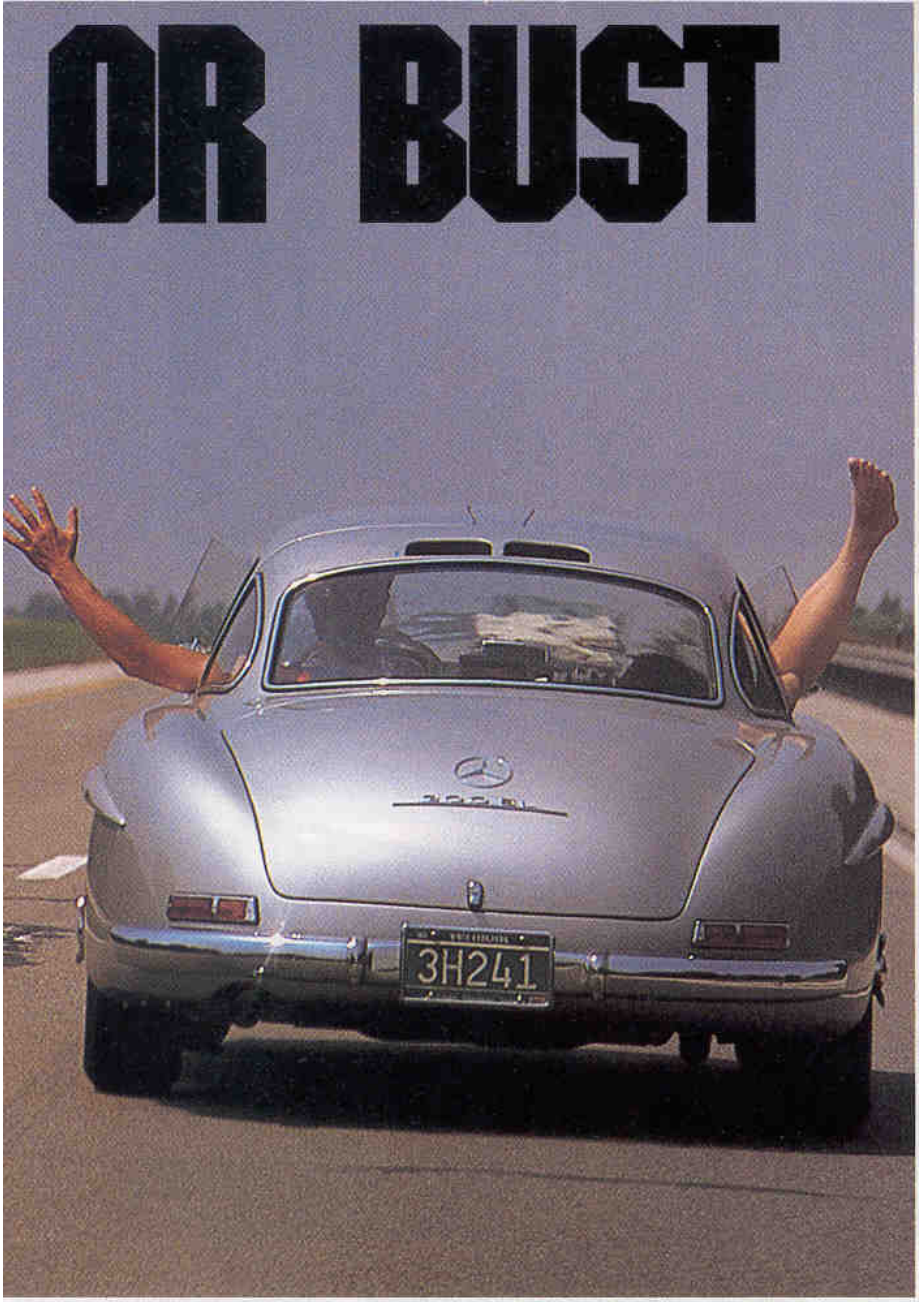
On the subject of concours-quality cosmetics, Paul Russell says: "It seems nasty to have a guy with white gloves on stick his finger up your tailpipe." Not that the Gullwing Service Company won't or can't do a concours-winning restoration. But to the guys in Essex, the matter of restoring the greatest of Mercedes-Benz production cars goes much deeper than the number of lacquer coats on the car's sensuous skin.

In its day, the 300SL was revolutionary. "With its unsurpassed speed, its acceleration still strong up in the three-figure region, and its exotic good looks and technical features, the 300SL hit the motoring world with the impact of a sledgehammer," wrote Karl Ludvigsen. Mercedes-Benz had never intended to build a production Gullwing. But Max Hoffman, the man responsible for bringing the greatest European marques to America in the Fifties, was enthralled by the 300SL that won the 1952 Carrera Panamericana. He convinced Mercedes-Benz to put the car on the street by promising cash for the delivery of 1000 production 300SLs.

The car debuted before the public at the 1954 New York International Motor Sports Show, showcasing the industry's first production fuel injection system. The 240-horsepower inline six-cylinder engine used an overhead cam, and the injection pump housed a built-in altimeter and thermostat to compensate for air-density changes. An aluminum intake manifold sprouted ram pipes to each of the cylinders, the brake drums were steel-lined aluminum, vacuum-boosted, and finned for cooling, and the chassis was a tube frame. Mercedes-Benz also advertised optional rear axle ratios that would deliver up to 162 miles an hour at the top end. And it was beautiful.

"For some people, these cars work as art objects," explains Finigan. "For us, they're almost like industrial machine objects. We build our cars to be driven. We pull apart every last nut and bolt; the cars are almost remanufactured. Most of our customers want cars that work, that they can drive 120 miles an hour all day long. If our cars can't do that,

OR BUST



they're failures. We don't build cars, put them on stretchers, and haul them to shows."

The Gullwing Service Company is the kind of place where real people rebuild honest cars for genuine car enthusiasts. Paul Russell's customers believe in his work, pay him by the *hour,* even. There's a two-year waiting list. And the Gullwing Service Company has the kind of customers who would say, "Sure, drive the car to Monterey for the races." It had, in fact, two such customers: Nick Jones and Manfredo Lippmann.

So, in honor of the Mercedes-Benz 100th Anniversary celebration at Pebble Beach and Laguna Seca, Alex Finigan, accompanied by his good pal me, co-workers Jack Daly, Peter Bulkeley, and Bruce Marston, and our fearless f-stop Martyn Goddard, lined up the aluminum Gullwing and a red 1958 Roadster for a week's worth of 500-mile days.

By the morning of our departure, our two-car caravan had grown to include: a white 1957 Roadster that we would drive as far as Chicago; attorney John Perenyi and his black pearl 1955 Gullwing; and the company van, which was hauling a covered trailer full of spare parts sandwiched around a 1960 Roadster that would be delivered to its owner in California. And Finigan had published our route in the 300SL newsletter as a challenge to any other sporting types to put their cars on the road to Monterey.

We had one rule that we promised to abide by: we wouldn't drive the aluminum Gullwing over ninety miles an hour if its side glass was removed, to avoid the possibility of blowing out the Plexiglas rear window. There wasn't too much else to worry about. Let's face it—when you can start with bushel baskets full of parts and finish with a pristine $150,000 Gullwing, you're not going to be racked with worry about the car breaking down.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTYN GODDARD

As with all road trips, this one started out tentatively, the drivers a little on edge as they tuned themselves into the rhythms of their cars and the road. We eased onto the Massachusetts Turnpike, raced to 100 mph, slowed to sixty, ran nose to tail, then side by side, until the only real matched set among us—Perenyi and his very own Gullwing—put his foot down and left.

We found him an hour later in a service area with the missing link of a perfect cross-country motorcade—master bodyman Al Poskus and his sidekick/protégé Johnny Yanakakis. Big, grizzly Al and short, well-muscled Johnny. Thirty-six and twenty-one. Lithuanian and Greek. The bodymen, in their lustrous, cream-colored 1969 280SE coupe, were waiting to show us the way. This, of course, could never have been accomplished with a stock 280SE, so Big Al mated a high-performance 250SE head to the 280 block, added a 280SL cam, injectors, and injection pump, and traded a four-speed manual for the automatic to squeeze more revs from the motor.

"Everybody said it wouldn't run," Big Al told us, smiling. "I'm really happy with the way it runs. What are we sitting here for?" And, grinning a demonic grin, he nailed the gas. We finally had our rhythm—to drive fast enough to keep Al in sight.

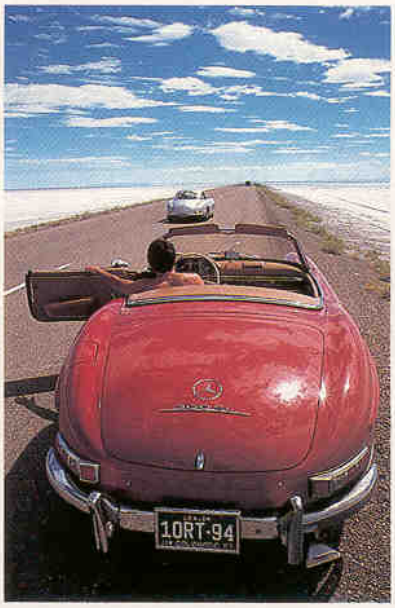
We could never hope to catch the crazy sucker—the aluminum Gullwing had a 4.11 rear end, good for only about 120—although we had great fun trying. All four forward gears were jampacked with revs waiting to be tapped. The car was more animal than bird; little of the fury under its hood was muffled from the cockpit, and we fairly had to shout to be heard. At sixty miles an hour, the straight-six was turning 3000 rpm; at eighty, 4000; at 100, a lusty, bellowing 5000 rpm. We were hooked on the noise at five grand, lungs thrumming in our chests from the engine's power coursing through the car, but prudence reined us in at around 4000.

Mercedes-Benz had the feel and

One last polish before we leave Essex.

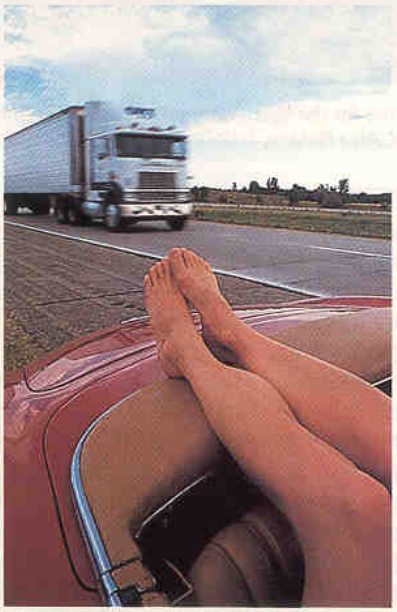
Unrefined but happy.

Finigan, toolless, watches Jack Daly man the Swiss Army knife.



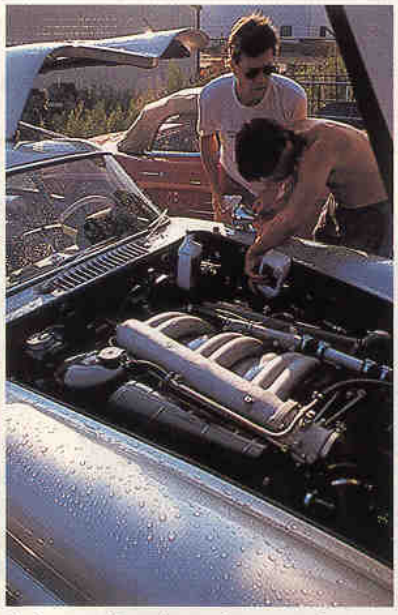
Lawyer John Perenyi gets a roadside comb-out.

Our heroes: Nick Jones and Manfredo Lippmann.



Gullwing running at the century mark.

Some cops just look tough.



Finigan and Bunchy perform morning service.

Finigan wins wet T-shirt honors.

We only came for the hats: Johnny Yanakakis, Big Al Poskus, John Perenyi, Lindamood, Alex Finigan, Jack Daly, Bruce Marston, and Peter Bulkeley (sitting).

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placement of the pedals and the stout little stick shifter right thirty years ago. And the gauges were clustered tightly within the circle of the large steering wheel. That thin, hard, oversized wheel (a mere 2.0 turns lock to lock) had complete command over our course; it was a little vague through center, but there was no slop in the system. The brute force required to handle the Gullwing's wheel would scare off the faint of heart. Conversely, there is a raw physical thrill that comes with expending a large amount of energy to drive a Gullwing with élan.

There aren't many thirty-year-old cars you could push like this. The boys had done their job well. They, of course, knew all along what the car would do. *I* was the one who was completely delirious thinking of the thrill of the week ahead.

"Jack and Bruce and Bunchy [Peter Bulkeley] were the only guys in the shop who wanted to go on this trip," admitted Finigan. "You work on them every day for ten years, you get blasé. It sometimes takes someone else's enthusiasm to spark you."

Of which there was plenty. Throughout the miles of road construction on Interstate 80 through New York and Pennsylvania, our rolling auto show made huge points with the construction crews. They always let us through on the tail end of the green flag, thumbs up. At our first fill-up, 412 miles from Essex, the station manager exploded from his office. "Wow! I ain't seen so much money in my life at once. Where'd ya get all them good-lookin' automobiles? I'm gonna take yer picture, girl. Ya prob'ly won't be back here, will ya?"

And a state trooper (Ohio, of course) followed us into a truck stop near Cleveland. He was a big one.

"Howdy, fellas," he said, pulling on his Big Hat against the broiling sun. The asphalt was literally oozing tar around his feet. "I've got a buddy with a '36 Ford pickup, and he's going to them gullwing doors." After thirty minutes swapping hot rod stories, he promised to keep an eye on the cars while we stopped for lunch. In *Ohio*, I'm telling you. These cars were definitely magic.

The boys didn't really get heated up until we got to Chicago and found a red Roadster with Ontario plates waiting in our hotel parking lot. By morning, two more Gullwings had materialized. So had our "support" vehicle, which was lagging so far behind that it might as well have been parked back in Essex.

A crowd gathered in the local Denny's parking lot to gawk at the flock of metal birds, while we powwowed over pancakes. The late arrivals had decided not to stop that night with us, but to press on for Bonneville. Finigan and Jack Daly locked eyes.

Big Al's bug-battering 280SE coupe.

"Bonneville!" they shouted in unison. "Oh, *shit!* SPEED WEEK!" It was the first time that the van and trailer, Jack Daly at the wheel, would beat us anywhere. The massive 280SE pulled the rumbling group back onto I-80. With Big Al leading the way, three-pointed star flattened against the 280's hood, four Gullwings and two red Roadsters flailed the deserted highway, holding first at ninety-five, then 100 miles an hour.

America's early morning vacation traffic might not have known the exact identity of the megabuck machinery barreling past, but it knew that this was something special. Try passing a Good Sam Winnebago at ninety in a Countach and see what digit gets flung up in salute. But it was all thumbs for the 300SLs. While Dad snoozed, Mom honked, and the kids waved furiously.

We found a farmer looking at the cars when we came back from lunch, in Altoona, Iowa. "You boys watch out for cops over to Omaha," he drawled. "They picked me up two months ago. They had an *air*plane!" he said in disgust. "My Whistler didn't do me a bit of good. I shoulda had it through the *roof*.

"What year is that Mar-cedes?" he asked, squinting at the Gullwing. "I didn't know they used them doors like Da Larryan."

Evening prayers before supper were the same every night:

"Didja see that Bronco on tank treads? *Jee*-zus!"

"Yeah! And didja see the '65 Bug with chrome zoomies? *Jee*-zus!"

"How 'bout the '36 Ford three-window coupe? *Jee*-zus!"

The Lancia Zagato. *Jee*-zus.

The '54 Chevy Bel Air two-door hardtop. *Jee*-zus.

The '56 Nomad wagon. *Jee*-zus.

The '58 Chevy 4x4 dump truck on eight tractor tires. *Jee*-zus.

"Yeah! Yeah!" hollered Finigan. "Holy *shit!*"

And the closer we got to Bonneville, the thicker grew the traffic of magnificent machinery. We found Jack Daly and Bruce Marston standing next to the truck by the entrance to the salt. They were in Bonneville T-shirts and Bonneville baseball caps, and they had installed a Bon-

neville sticker and a Bonneville license plate bracket on the van. Jack, looking for all the world like a member of ZZ Top, had chunks of salt dribbling from his long red beard. "I kissed the salt," he said sheepishly.

Because none of us had been there before, we were stunned to discover that the paved road stopped five miles short of the action. "We can't drive the cars on the salt!" we yelled at each other, as we teetered on the edge of the pavement, dying to get to that point in the distance where a blinding light was moving rapidly across the horizon. Eventually, we bought T-shirts and left, devastated.

"We should have hitched . . ." I began.

"Don't *even* say it!" Finigan warned.

It was hot now, well over 100 degrees. We had the Gullwing's side windows removed, but the sweat was soaking the towels covering the seats. "I feel like someone sprayed me with Pam," whined Finigan, as I scribbled in my trusty notebook. "Are you writing that you're sweating like a hog?" he asked.

". . . sweating like a hog . . . ," I scribbled.

It could have been worse. Gullwings were notorious for being as hot as ovens, and the Gullwing Service Company had sprayed closed-cell foam behind the dashboard and in the channels behind the doors to better insulate the cockpit. They also louvered the rocker bottoms to suck hot air out the bottom of the rocker panels. So we got roasted instead of toasted.

We traded often between the Gullwing and the Roadster, just to experience a little breeze. For the passenger, though, the Roadster was even worse. Its exhaust ran down the right side of the car, and the floor would become hot enough to cook Thanksgiving dinner on. I would swing around in the seat and ride with head on dash and legs up over the trunk, which drove the truckers crazy, according to Big Al's squawking CB.

At first, we thought the heat had caused the Gullwing's only mechanical breakdown: a failure in the auxiliary fuel pump, which we ran to counteract vapor lock during hard driving. The problem proved to be electrical. The truck, of course, was about five hours behind us.

"Twenty grand worth of tools in the truck," groaned Finigan, "and we don't even have a dime to use for a screwdriver."

Martyn Goddard peered around his Nikon, stopped shooting for a moment, and fished around in his camera bag, coming up with his bazillion-blade, full-boat, *dee*-luxe version of the trusty Swiss Army knife. The boys jumped into action, jury-rigging a hot lead from the pump to a taillight.

"Martyn, do you suppose you'd have a soldering iron in that bag?" asked Jack Daly.

The Roadster experienced a number of niggling problems—a wacky speedo cable, a horn that began honking by itself in Nevada—but nothing that shut the car down.

Living with Gullwing and Roadster for a week sparked great debate over which one we'd buy when we won the lottery. The Roadster was certainly an easier car to live with. Its handling was less diabolical than the Gullwing's, thanks to the redesigned low-pivot swing axle assembly and the addition of a horizontally located third coil spring. (This "compensating" coil allowed softer main springs for reduced camber change with no loss of load capacity.) And the Roadster's 3.25:1 rear axle ratio made it a much easier car in which to carry on a conversation. Although muted, the engine still sang. Coming slowly down through the Sierra Nevada from South Lake Tahoe to Sacramento, Jack Daly played between second and third gears to hear the engine's delicious shriek on the rock faces that lined Highway 50. "You could almost feel it smiling," he said later on.

To Bunchy, though, the Gullwing lit the flame. "It makes me feel like I did when I first had my driver's license and didn't want to ever get out of the car."

Crossing the California state line had been bittersweet. The adventure would be history in 300 miles. And, sadly, so would the camaraderie. "I feel like this will be the highlight of my life," said Bunchy, forlornly. "And it's almost over."

We were greeted in Monterey by the not-even-slightly-anxious Messrs. Jones and Lippmann, and the rest of the Gullwing Service Company, who had come to watch the boss race Nick Jones's Gullwing. (Was there no end to the generosity of Mr. Jones?) There was a moment of uncomfortable tension, as the guys from the shop who had flown to Laguna looked at our tan, laughing group, arms thrown casually around each other, eyes bright. The unasked question was clear on each face: Why didn't *I* go?

I walked away from my pals at Laguna Seca. Paul Russell would drive our faithful Gullwing to eighth overall in the 300SL race. Bunchy, John Perenyi, Jack Daly, Big Al, and Johnny Yanakakis would drive back. Finigan would fly.

And I would fly to England two days later, sit in a pub wrapped in sweaters drinking an ale with Le Mans winner Derek Bell, suntan shredding off my face, and hear the echo of Finigan leading the guys through the paddock at Laguna. They were praying again:

"Didja see that '53 Siata 208? *Jee*-zus!"

"Yeah! And didja see the Type 35 Bugatti? *Jee*-zus!"

"How 'bout the Birdcage Maserati? *Jee*-zus!"

The '64 Alfa GTZ. *Jee*-zus.

The '65 Cobra 427. *Jee*-zus.

The '59 Stanguellini Formula Junior. *Jee*-zus.